Puget Sound Chinook winter minimum size limit reduction fact sheet

Background: The minimum size limit for Chinook retention has varied widely during the history of the Puget Sound sport fishery. It was 12" in the 1930's, no size limit in the 1970's, size limit of 20" in the late 1970's, and has remained 22" (today's limit) since 1983. The current size limit (22") was designed to help achieve 50:50 harvest sharing between state and tribal fisheries. The majority of support and benefit from reducing the size limit is for winter mark-selective fisheries (MSF).

1) Modeling of the size limit change has been approved

In 2013, the Pacific Fishery Management Council approved the changes necessary to properly model size limit changes in the Fishery Regulation Assessment Model (FRAM).

2) Size limit reductions will have a negligible impact on ESA-listed Chinook

Modeling indicates that reducing the minimum size limit from 22" to 20" during winter MSFs will not measurably increase ESA impacts, because these are mark-selective, hatchery-directed fisheries.

3) Recreational fisheries will see an increase in the number of allowable encounters

The abundance and size structure of fish present in the Puget Sound in any given year is variable, but on average reducing the size limit to 20" may translate into a ~30% increase in what's considered to be legal to keep during winter MSFs and a ~10% increase during summer fisheries. Mid and South Puget Sound areas would likely see the largest increase in catch during the winter.

4) Released fish have a very low chance of being caught again

The loss in future access to big Chinook (age 4-5) due to the increased harvest of small blackmouth (mostly age 2) is minimal due to the natural mortality that will occur anyway (e.g., 50% chance of surviving from age 2 to 5 in the absence of fishing and maturation), combined with the relatively small contribution to total fishery-related mortality arising from current fisheries. It is unlikely that any increase in harvest of 20-22" fish during winter MSFs will cause an evolutionary change (e.g., towards younger maturation). The recreational fleet does not have the power to change the size structure of Chinook unlike other fishing methods. Additionally, there is a misconception of the intention and effects size limits have on stocks they are trying to protect; on the contrary, if the public would like to protect larger fish, a maximum size limit should be proposed.

5) Monitoring fisheries will continue so that changes are well understood

Given that it has been nearly 20 years since the minimum limit was less than 22", it will be necessary to monitor fisheries to measure changes in fishing effort, angler behavior (e.g., compliance, voluntary release), catch success, and stock exploitation patterns. The sampling programs already in place for our 'intensively monitored' mark-selective fisheries are sufficiently rigorous to provide this insight.

6) Reasoning for reducing the size limit to 20" during winter fisheries

Reducing the minimum size limit to 20" will allow for more successful trips for those who choose to keep 20-22" fish. It will allow anglers to access a more hatchery fish that they help to fund through license fees, while simultaneously reducing the number of hatchery strays on spawning grounds. Increased harvest will help restore 50:50 sharing of allowable catch where inequities are perceived.